



Review: [Untitled]

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Balthazar (Au Hasard, Balthazar) by Robert Bresson
William Johnson

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Film Reviews

BALTHAZAR

(*Au Hasard, Balthazar*) Written and directed by Robert Bresson.
Music: Jean Wiéner (with Schubert's Piano Sonata in A Major).
Photography: Ghislain Cloquet.

The film begins with the birth of Balthazar, the donkey, and ends with his death. In between, his life intertwines with those of the inhabitants of a small French town. Marie, a silent, withdrawn girl, first adopts Balthazar as a pet. They are parted when her father takes over the management of an estate belonging to a friend. The friend's son Jacques loves Marie, but she falls under the spell of Gérard, an amoral, sadistic youth. Balthazar meanwhile is bought by the village baker for making deliveries. Gérard becomes the baker's delivery boy and torments Balthazar. The donkey falls ill and the baker is about to kill him when a strange tramp named Arnold bursts in and takes Balthazar away. After a while Balthazar runs free, is taken in by a circus and taught a computing act. Meanwhile Marie's father has become estranged from his friend because he refuses, out of pride, to deny false rumors that he is embezzling from the estate.

And so the film goes on, until in the end Marie is raped by a gang of Gérard's friends and dies; her father dies; Arnold dies; and Balthazar, "borrowed" by Gérard and his gang for a smuggling expedition, is shot by a border guard.

In any verbal summary the plot is bound to seem like a morass of disconnected and sometimes far-fetched incidents. As in *Diary of a Country Priest*, Bresson builds up an unusual density of experience by pressing rapidly from episode to episode. But unlike *Diary*—or any of Bresson's other films, for that matter—*Balthazar* does not have a central character that binds this varied experience together. The principal characters, including Balthazar himself, alternate between foreground and background, or disappear from the scene to reappear much later. Bresson's laconic style, his unapologetic

use of coincidence, and his insistence on deadpan acting (the donkey that plays Balthazar is more expressive than most of the cast) make the surface events of his film seem even more arbitrary and inscrutable.

It's tempting to look to symbolism for an answer. Marie ritually dedicates herself to Balthazar, as if he were a stand-in for God. Arnold, who might easily be a Christ figure on the lines of the bearded halfwit in Dreyer's *Ordet*, suggests that the donkey represents a passive observer of human frailties. But how does this jibe with Bresson's remark (quoted by Richard Roud in *Sight and Sound*) that the donkey is a symbol of virility?

All of these symbols—and others just as "obvious"—may have a brief validity at different times during the film, but clearly there is no one symbol that will reveal the meaning of the film as a whole. There's always the possibility, of course, that the film *doesn't* make sense as a whole, that Bresson himself was confused. Many of the elements in the film are unexpectedly modern, outside Bresson's usual ambit. Marie and Gérard, for example, might need only a touch of flip humor to be at home in a Godard film. Could Bresson be trying, and failing, to enter the world of alienated youth, like Carné in *The Cheaters* and Antonioni in *The Blow-Up*? But in these films one can easily peel away the style—the romantic melancholy that Carné imposes on his young Parisians, the brilliant surface that overlays Antonioni's near-Victorian moralizing about young Londoners—and reveal the banal content just below the surface. *Balthazar* has no such weak seams between style and content. If one strips away the trappings of contemporary youth—Gérard's transistor radio, his rock-and-roll, his gun, his destructiveness—the film remains as richly textured as before.

Though *Balthazar* represents something of a new departure for Bresson, it does not depart so far from his previous films as to be influenced by film-making fashions. Right from the start Bresson has gone his own way. All his films are religious in the deepest sense of the word, which sets him far apart from direc-

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tors like George Stevens and John Huston who observe only the conventional pieties. But he also differs fundamentally from the few other serious religious directors, and this difference has emerged more and more clearly with each of the seven films that he has made in the past 24 years.

Bresson's first two films, *Les Anges du Péché* (1943) and *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1944) had a fairly conventional dramatic form which partly obscured the distinctiveness of their themes. The transformation of pride into humility through the fire of humiliation recurs in most of Bresson's films. An even more important theme is launched: the idea that one attains freedom not by trying to smash one's way out of one's circumstances but by struggling patiently within them. Thus the over-confident nun in *Les Anges du Péché* finally comes to grips with a crisis for which she is at first totally unprepared; and the man trapped into marrying a *danseuse* in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* accepts her gladly.

Beginning with *Diary of a Country Priest* (1949) Bresson's style becomes as idiosyncratic as his content. *Diary* does still have a dark, brooding intensity about it which might call to mind the atmosphere of Ingmar Bergman's films; but the resemblance is only superficial, and it disappears entirely from Bresson's subsequent films. For Bergman, God and the after-life are matters of doubt and mystery. For Bresson—as for his country priest—they are matters of certainty: it's only in this world that doubts and mysteries arise.

Holding this view, Bresson has no need for the symbolism that Bergman wields, ax-like, against the wall of mystery between this world and whatever lies beyond. Bresson is concerned with clarifying the situation of man here and now, dipped in flesh for a brief moment in eternity; and to do this he uses not symbolism but synecdoche—choosing the particular section of a particular character's life that best reveals the human condition. The method may overlap symbolism; the country priest's hereditary disease may perhaps be taken as a symbol for original sin. But nothing is lost if one re-



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jects this symbol: the disease in itself is a powerful enough handicap to establish the intensity of the priest's struggle.

In Bresson's next three films—*A Man Escaped* (1956), *Pickpocket* (1959) and *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962)—he strives to drill closer and closer to the heart of the human condition as he sees it. Emotionalism is out; so is any suggestion of divine intervention. All that counts is the individual soul struggling against the difficulties of this world. The condemned man in *A Man Escaped* struggles against imprisonment, scraping away at his cell day after day with a spoon. Just when he is ready to escape, a cellmate is thrust on him, and he must take the risk of trusting the newcomer—the struggle must be crowned with charity. The young hero of *Pickpocket* lacks this charity; he knows he must struggle but he does not know what he should struggle for, and he directs his energies into acquiring the skill and grace of an expert pickpocket.

Here Bresson's central character has become little more than a single driving force. And this sparseness is carried even further for *The Trial of Joan of Arc*. It's easy to compare this Joan to Dreyer's, the *Trial* with the *Passion*, to Bresson's disadvantage. But even though I do not like the *Trial*, I can see why Bresson wanted to make it the way he did. Dreyer's film can be appreciated entirely as a humanitarian drama in which a defenseless woman stands up to a tyrannical establishment. As in all his films, Dreyer lingers lovingly on objects, faces, textures, light in its myriad qualities; frequently

he pans or dollies from one point of interest to another as if he cannot bear the brutal parting of a cut. In Dreyer's view, since the world is God's creation, it is marvelous in itself. One result is that his *Passion* makes not merely the circumstances of Joan's death but the fact of death itself seem terrible.

To Bresson this is all wrong. Life in itself is not wonderful, and death in itself not terrible. Since Joan was a soldier, Bresson sees her as tough and level-headed, with a matter-of-fact assurance of life after death. In his film she is temperamentally a match for her accusers and judges, and—during the trial at least—she arouses little pity. Only when it comes to the manner of Joan's execution does Bresson seek to engage our emotions, beginning with the close-up of her bare feet treading the cobblestones on her way to the stake.

That close-up is crucial. Although Bresson does not linger as Dreyer does on objects and faces, there is nothing abstract about his use of the camera. He does not rely on noble postures, reverent tableaux or grandiose compositions in the style of *The Bible* or *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Many of his shots arouse strong physical sensations, like the close-up of Joan's feet or the similar shot in *Balthazar* where the donkey's hooves are seen stepping hesitantly over rocky ground; or indeed like the opening scene of *Balthazar*, where young Marie's smooth white arm stretches into the frame to caress the dark and fluffy baby donkey, making one almost literally feel the simultaneous closeness and separateness of the two creatures. Bresson may take a detached view of the world, but he sees it sharply. Just as his most saintly characters are not passive souls but activists working through the flesh, he himself works through the cinematic flesh of familiar sights and sounds.

This is what makes Bresson's films so fascinating to a nonbeliever like myself. He does not reject or distort the world as we know it but places it as is in the light of eternity. The transformation is done without flourishes; yet it is fully as startling as the altered modes of reality in *Marienbad* or in science fiction films

like *La Jetée* or *The Damned*.

The comparison is not far-fetched. Like the woman in *Marienbad* and the man in *La Jetée*, all of Bresson's central characters from *Diary of a Country Priest* onward have been cast adrift in a disconcerting continuum of time and space. What science fiction presents as allegory Bresson presents as fact: his priest, his pickpocket, and even his Joan are space travelers trying to preserve their identity in an alien world.

The pickpocket is the first of Bresson's central characters to come close to failure. He is in much the same predicament as Losey's mutant children: his defense mechanisms against the threats of the modern world has hypertrophied, blocking him from normal contact with other people. *Pickpocket*, of course, has none of the rhetoric of *The Damned*; it errs in the opposite direction, in excessive terseness and understatement.

This is a pivotal film, combining as it does an unprecedented rigor of style with the unprecedented (for Bresson) theme of alienation. With *The Trial of Joan of Arc* Bresson carries the rigor still further; and although Joan is not alienated in the modern sense of the word, she deliberately blanks herself out in dealing with her judges and advisers for fear of being tempted to recant. The country priest and the condemned man, single-minded and self-contained though they are, allow certain counter-currents of feeling to reach the surface. The priest shows an unexpected delight in being taken for a ride on a motorbike; the condemned man, after his escape, is suddenly jaunty. The pickpocket and Joan lack this richness of character. With the *Trial*, indeed, the lines along which Bresson was developing seemed to lead directly to a vanishing point.

But then came *Balthazar*.

Seen in the light of Bresson's other films, *Balthazar* ceases to be an enigma. Not that the film becomes simple to explain; but one can decide with confidence what questions need *not* be asked about it, what subtle meanings are *not* hidden away in its intricate plot.

The novelty of *Balthazar* rests in the fact that Bresson has fused the rigor of *Pickpocket* and the *Trial* with the richness of his earlier films. He has done this quite simply, by presenting several protagonists instead of one. Each of his four previous films revolves around the protagonist named in the title: even when the other characters are as memorable as Chantal and the Curé de Tourcy in *Diary*, they and their problems remain tributary to the central figure. In *Balthazar*, five characters present different facets of a condition which, in *Pickpocket*, is revealed through the central character alone. Marie, Gérard, Arnold, Marie's father and the miserly corn merchant all lack grace; or in less theological terms, are blocked from finding satisfaction in life. In Marie's father and the merchant the block is a simple obsession: pride in the former, avarice in the latter. Arnold is impelled by gluttony and sloth. Gérard and Marie, like the pickpocket, are more creative, each trying to impose a pattern on what seems to them to be the meaninglessness of life. Gérard's method is sadism: since life is absurd, he will beat it to the punch by himself creating accidents (spilling oil on the road for cars to slither on), himself inflicting pain (tying a burning newspaper to Balthazar's tail) and himself forcing other people to act against their will (gaining sexual ascendancy over Marie). As for Marie, yearning for God in what seems to be a God-forsaken universe, she makes a divinity out of Balthazar.

But the donkey's importance in the film, and his place of honor in the title, do not depend on symbolism. Bresson is still as direct as ever. It is Marie, dreaming of an omnipotent love, who deifies Balthazar and at the same time sees him as an erotic symbol; it is Arnold who projects on Balthazar his own role as a wandering observer. Balthazar's real importance is the fact that he is an animal, and as such denied both salvation and damnation; all he need struggle for is survival. He serves as a touchstone for the human beings he encounters, whose characters are revealed both in the way they treat him and in the way their lives compare in dignity with his. But there

can be no real contact between animal and humans. Smooth skin may touch rough hide, and Marie may crown Balthazar with flowers, but any signs of humanity or divinity in the donkey are as illusory as the arithmetical ability he displays at the circus. When Marie throws herself at the mercy of the corn merchant, whose lust is tempered only by greed, Balthazar is standing nearby; but of course he does not spring to the rescue like an asinine Lassie. If Balthazar were able to attack the merchant he would have done so long before to save his own skin; and in any case it is not her body that Marie wants rescued but her mind.

Balthazar is the pivotal though passive character in all the important relationships in the film. Just as Bresson conveys the separateness of Marie and Balthazar through the close-up of fur and skin, he translates the spiritual gulf between Marie and the merchant into sharp physical terms, contrasting the squat body, mean gestures, and crabbed voice of the merchant with the slim, smooth body and direct speech and gestures of Marie. This contrast is reminiscent of the curious scene where Balthazar confronts the caged animals at the circus, impassively staring at and being stared at by a tiger, a polar bear, and a chimpanzee. There is nothing metaphorical about the resemblance between these two scenes—it is not an ornamental way of saying that men are like wild animals. On the contrary, Bresson is once again making a statement of what is for him simple fact: that just as there can be no real contact or understanding between animals and humans, so there can be none between humans who lack grace.

Balthazar may sound like a gloomy film, but it is not, thanks largely to the diversity of its human and animal protagonists. Taken individually they may be drab or unpleasant: Marie, the most important of the humans, is almost as monotonous as Bresson's Joan. But interlinked as they are, with all their desires and sufferings, they form a glowing tapestry of life that exhilarates rather than depresses.

That isn't the only paradox about *Balthazar*. Bresson, as usual, admits no easy appeals to

the emotions—and certainly none of the sentimentality that most films about animals smuggle in. And yet, largely because of his rigorous treatment, the film is moving. Within a brief period of time (the film runs little longer than 90 minutes) Bresson condenses the diverse struggles for life of his five humans and a donkey. The complex experience is honed to a sharpness that touches one deeply and haunts one's memory for a long time.—WILLIAM JOHNSON

THE BLOW-UP

Director: Michelangelo Antonioni. Script: Antonioni, Tonino Guerra, and Edward Bond. Photography: Carlo Di Palma. Music: The Animals. MGM.

The Blow-Up is not only a film which deals mysteriously with photographic enlargements; it also emerges as a magnification of Antonioni's whole repertoire of themes, now incised with a feverishness that borders on hallucination. Without doubt, most of his earlier perceptions are present: of the insufficiency and transience of human affection, of chilled eroticism, of the muteness of objects, of intermittent hysteria, and a Sundered social fabric. Into this always pessimistic but understated matrix of themes, he introduces such sharp awareness of the nominally bright-eyed mod London locale, that its various strata burst more freshly into recognition than in many a film by a native director.

But none of this is as central to the work as its concern for blending degrees of anxious dream into an almost documentary reality. The fact that the protagonist here, an artist figure like such earlier Antonioni "heroes" as the architect and the writer, is a photographer, involved with a stylish *recording* of his own scene, only heightens Antonioni's enigma. This photographer has a devilish flair for capturing the decorative hanky-panky, the high or mean extravagance of gleaming English camp—he is, after all, one of its creatures. But when it comes to catching real life on the wing—and, as he (and we) suspect, a particularly dire instance of it—his lens unaccountably fails. More

than this, there is an equation made between the hectic gropings of the photographer in his search after truth, and the equivocations of the movie camera itself. So that, in a whirl of subliminal hints and peripheral vignettes (never in themselves parenthetical: the camera may skip ahead, but never jumps to the side of the action), one is made to doubt whether certain events occur in the character's imagination or one's own. Not only does a paucity of narrative evidence contrast with a richness of behavioral provocation, but cinematic means oscillate subtly in their truth values. *Blow-Up*, in the end, is a psyche-out.

That Antonioni has always been more interested in probing the psychological tropisms of people than explaining their actual situations or narrating the events which make up their lives, is evident from all his earlier work. Here he seems to be telling us, not only that the "events"—fragments of social or sexual interchanges—are all that we can know about human psychology, but that they themselves are subject to canceling interpretations. Yet the disbelief which they incite is as hesitant as his whole view of human impingements is tentative. There would be, perhaps, nothing new in this Pirandellesque situation, were it not for Antonioni's emphatic reliance on the visual. What is being said, what is being exchanged, between characters, is less revealing than is how they might be *observed*. The famous "inability to communicate" which has supposedly marked his personages, far from being an indigenous trait, is nothing more than a reflex of Antonioni's skepticism about narrative as a cinematic vehicle of expression. Hence, the real tension that symptomizes this, as well as his preceding films, is the abortiveness of an obsession with states of mind that can be materialized only through a revelation of surfaces and silences. There is a built-in acknowledgement of the inadequacy of photography to trap these states; but for that very reason, a correspondingly more studied amplification of the formal means to surmount that inadequacy. In the largest sense, then, Antonioni is a director of yearning.